Legal jargon buster helps those who need justice the most

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The law can be a bit like a foreign language, with its strange words, Latin terms and hyper-specific phrases. It takes years of study to become fluent. For the lay person, understanding all this legalese is hard enough: *speaking* it is nigh impossible.

Until today. Thanks to two teams of Melbourne legal experts and computer scientists, there's now a kind of Google Translate for law, which lets ordinary people use their own words when looking for pro bono legal help. It's a major win for access to justice, and it's all powered by AI.

Some of Justice Connect's AI experts. Davide Gaido, Denise Qvist, Anna Kricker and David McNamara. **Nicole Reed**

One of the tool's creators is Justice Connect, a Melbourne and Sydney-based community legal centre. For Justice Connect's clients, legalese is a real problem. These are everyday people, looking for free or low-cost legal help – for instance, with a rental dispute or a workplace disagreement.

Usually, these prospective clients come across Justice Connect online, after searching for pro bono lawyers. Then they click into its website and start filling out the intake forms.

But often, these prospective clients don't have the legal vocab to explain what they need, says Tom O'Doherty, Justice Connect's head of innovation.

"If they don't know what their legal issue is, they go to one service, they get pushed to another service, they get kind of disillusioned with the whole process, and then they just don't get help."

And so, artificial intelligence to the rescue. Together with a group of Melbourne University computer scientists, Justice Connect overhauled their "intake tool", equipping it with their signature AI translator: clients can now describe their problems in their own words – which the AI then converts into legal concepts, ready-made for the lawyers.

Community engagement

Winner
University of Melbourne with Justice Connect
Finalists
Alcohol and Drug Foundation
ANTSA
Financial Literacy Australia
RMIT University with Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
SixPivot

Source: Financial Review

This translation tool has won the community engagement category in the 2026 Financial Review AI Awards, with the victory shared between Melbourne Uni and Justice Connect.

This team-up was "unique" among entrants, according to Jeannie Paterson, a professor in AI and law and one of this year's judges.

"The reason we liked it is it's not just a good outcome helping with access to justice, it's a very carefully crafted product," says Paterson.

The tool is burdened by none of the usual AI glitz: as O'Doherty explains, "we just call it our AI model, or triage tool. We don't have a fancy AI name for it."

But looks can be deceiving. Under the hood is some serious firepower – and serious hard work.

In fact, Justice Connect's AI tool took years to train – a process involving armies of volunteer lawyers. Beginning in 2022, these lawyers were sent "samples", bits of writing from real-life clients, which they would then assign to one of 32 legal categories.

Melbourne University research Kemal Kurniawan was part of the team that built Justice Connect's AI. **Eamon Gallagher**

The programmers call this process “tagging”, and they built it into an online game, for lawyers to play during their pro bono hours. With the “tagged up” data, the AI slowly learnt how lawyers classify things.

“They haven’t taken a commercial product and just used it,” Paterson says. “They’ve built it using the pro bono hours of lawyers.”

And the training didn’t stop there. After the tool launched, in August last year, the programmers realised the AI wasn’t great at understanding Indigenous people or older people. So they focused on language samples from those cohorts, sending them to lawyers for tagging until the AI got it right.

“The model got more, more accurate, and it became less biased,” says Denise Qvist, Justice Connect’s innovation manager.

It’s an example of the “human-centred design” that underpins the project, according to Qvist. “We always get feedback from help-seekers,” she says.

Over 75 per cent accuracy

The magic happens inside Justice Connect’s signature “intake tool”, an online questionnaire that tries to match a “help-seeker” with the right kind of lawyer.

When the intake tool launched, back in 2017, there was no AI. Users had to click through a series of technical questions – and according to O’Doherty, all the legalese proved a major turn-off.

“People got to that stage of ‘what areas of law do you fit into here’, and people dropped out. About 50 per cent would have dropped off.”

Now, with the AI in place, users type in their story, and the software figures out the legal angle. Nearly everyone sticks with the tool – only about 10 per cent give up.

And just as importantly, the AI is reliably accurate.

Professor Jeannie Paterson, who judged the community engagement category, says Justice Connect's AI is "unique". **Australian Financial Review**

"The accuracy of the model is about 75 per cent in terms of classifying the correct legal area of a given problem," says Kemal Kurniawan, one of the Melbourne University scientists, along with academics Timothy Baldwin, Mel Mistica and Jey Han Lau.

That performance is far better than the average lay person, Kurniawan says: "Normal people can only identify legal areas about 35 per cent of the time."

The accuracy is crucial for Justice Connect's 75 or so staff, about half of them lawyers, split across Sydney and Melbourne. The legal charity handles a good whack of cases itself, but also acts as a "clearing house", referring people in need to the right pro bono law firm.

Once upon a time, staff would have spent hours manually processing every single request for help. But the new AI triage tool has brought leaps in efficiency, according to Qvist, the innovation manager.

"The system is quite stretched. There's a lot of requests for assistance and all the lawyers are quite limited to be able to support all of that in a growing demand," Qvist says.

"So it's reducing that manual intake and triage – it's not replacing people, it's just making them more efficient. And by doing this, then we're able to help more people."

For those with legal problems, it's made a huge difference.

“They meet our eligibility criteria because now they know that’s the area of law,” O’Doherty explains. “They know we can help them with it, based on them reviewing our eligibility criteria – that gets them to where they want to be, or where they need to go in a quicker way, whether it be Justice Connect or somewhere else.”

What particularly impressed the judges about the Justice Connect project was its step-by-step design process.

“They’ve done it in a really careful way,” says Paterson. “They’ve developed the triage tool. They’ve tested the triage tool. They didn’t use ChatGPT and go ‘can you help us’.”

As Kurniawan explains, the triage tool is a language model – but not a *large* language model. “It’s a simple older generation of model, it’s called BERT” – a much-needed abbreviation for “bidirectional encoder representations from transformers”.

BERT software is popular for what computer scientists call “classification problems”, Kurniawan says. It’s very good at analysing all kinds of input text, but its output is restricted to 32 legal “categories”, effectively options on a menu. This avoids some of the nightmares that come with the large language model territory, Kurniawan says.

“We know they tend to produce fabricated facts – we call it hallucinations – and they’re found to be quite biased. But with this BERT-based model, we sort of avoid these issues by having the output as a fixed label.”

Lawyer-powered training is crucial for honing the AI’s accuracy. But it’s not just the pro bono game of “tag”. As Kurniawan explains, there’s a secret and groundbreaking edge: disagreement.

Different lawyers might “tag” a sample with a different legal category: reasonable minds can differ. Normally, when training AIs, experts try to resolve disagreements and “force an agreement”, Kurniawan says.

But in this project, the programmers are embracing diversity.

“We acknowledge that all these differences are actually not noise, they’re actually some kind of useful signal. Instead of taking the majority vote, we just take everything, because we trust the lawyers are actually trying to do the right thing here.

“The result that we have is that not only the model’s overall accuracy improves, but also its fairness across all these demographic groups improves.”

The AI’s careful, in-house design addresses problems that come from using off-the-shelf products, Paterson says.

“A lot of people’s anxiety about using Gen AI is: what does this mean for us if we are tying ourselves to models that have been built elsewhere?

“How do we put in guardrails? How do we make sure this is a product that speaks to our values?”

“So instead they’ve built it themselves.”

The other finalists

The collaboration between Melbourne University and Justice Connect was one of several finalists in this year’s AI awards to focus on helping ordinary people with complicated language.

Among the other innovative entries, drawn from highly specialised fields, was **RMIT's EINSTEIN AI**, a "machine reader" for detecting rare but deadly infections in immuno-compromised cancer patients.

And then there was **Bamboo**, from **SixPivot**: an AI platform that links new mums with experienced mums, who offer crucial peer support, to reduce the isolation of early motherhood.

Financial Literacy Australia used large language models and various AI tools to create a vast array of online educational models. The AI took complicated concepts and simplified them into interactive, "scenario-based" courses, that were all reviewed for accuracy.

Another finalist was **"dib"**, an online chatbot built by the **Drug and Alcohol Foundation** to counter misinformation about alcohol and drugs. Users can interact with the chatbot anonymously, asking it all kinds of questions about topics from addiction to the definition of a standard drink – and dib answers using only the foundation's existing, verified info.

And the submission from **ANTSA** was also a chatbot – this time for mental healthcare, an area where AI is fast becoming a fixture. But instead of an unregulated, hallucination-prone public model, ANTSA's bot is designed to be part of the treatment process: patients can speak to the bot as they like, but under their clinician's supervision.

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